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### **Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating (Review of Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating by Norman Wirzba)**

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Norman Wirzba. *Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating*.

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xix+244pp. Paper, \$25.99, ISBN 978-0521146241.

*Reviewed by David Grumett, University of Edinburgh*

At the heart of the Christian religion is an act of eating: the Eucharist. Otherwise known as the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, or the Mass, this is referred to in all four Gospels and described by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. From these facts, it might reasonably be assumed that food has a prominent place in Christian theology and spirituality. Unfortunately, this is not true. Since Augustine, who was anxious to distance himself from the Manichean sect, of which he had formerly been a member, mainstream Christians have been wary of getting too concerned with food. After his conversion, Augustine thought that Christians could eat whatever they wanted provided it had not been sacrificed to idols, and this is largely true of his modern successors. In the West, Christian groups for whom food has been central have usually been marginal and have sometimes been viewed by the established churches as heretical. Within these churches, the Eucharist has typically been used theologically as a means of transposing everyday material acts of eating into an abstract realm far removed from the customs, traditions, restrictions, avoidances and excesses of everyday eating. For this reason, very little serious reflection exists in modern theology or mainstream Christian spirituality on the topic of food.

Norman Wirzba makes an admirable contribution to filling this gap. He does not follow the utopian path trodden by the Manicheans and later sects such as the Cathars, Seventh Day Baptists, Dorrellites, Bible Christians or even Seventh Day Adventists, for whom a radically distinctive diet helped to shape a spiritual identity distinct from wider society and other churches. But neither does Wirzba offer a mere commentary on current food practices. On the contrary, he is appropriately scathing about the dystopian dietary economy that twenty-first century humans have spawned. The excessive use of pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, deforestation, genetic modification, irrigation, industrial harvesting and global transportation have, as Wirzba shows, massively increased land, water and air pollution and rendered many plant and animal species extinct. As a result, many areas of land are now less productive than thirty years ago, with artificial interventions increasingly required to maintain even existing productivity levels.

Nevertheless, what is here served up is not another diatribe against the modern food and agriculture industry that fails to address the basic question of how the world should be fed. Rather, Wirzba's account is positive in the sense of comprising a constructive proposal for how Christians and others may eat in an ambiguous and complex world. Transcending the dialectic of utopia and dystopia, he seeks new ways of living responsibly in a fragile world. As was seen during the course of the twentieth century, such a world is at least as likely to be destroyed by ideology as by a failure of intellectual capacity.

Indeed, a dietary utopianism is excluded from the first page, on which Wirzba acknowledges that eating, despite being a means of life, depends on death. For creatures to live, others must die. Even the harvesting of crops results in the killing of rodents and other small animals at ground level, while beneath 'countless bacteria, microorganisms, fungi, and insects are engaged in a feeding frenzy that absorbs life into death and death back into the conditions for life' (p. 53). In opening, Wirzba writes: 'Life as we know it *depends* on death, *needs* death, which means that death is not simply the cessation of life but its precondition' (p. 1). His theology is Trinitarian, promoting the sharing and nurturing of life, hospitality and making room for others above straightforward annihilation through consumption.

Being eaters, we are all dependent on gardens even if we are not ourselves gardeners. Linking cultivation with culture, Wirzba powerfully describes the importance of learning how to garden. This requires confronting personal ignorance and sloth, accepting contingency, compromise and failure, and waiting for growth in a timescale that is not one's own. The first gardener, Wirzba reminds us, was God, who planted Eden and thereby created the space in which other forms of life

could flourish. Such flourishing is a slow process. Although the organic matter and microbial life that constitute good soil develop gradually, they may be destroyed rapidly. Such destruction, Wirzba convincingly argues, is widespread, with human eaters having become ecological, economic and physiological exiles on their own land, in thrall to an agriculture industry that has degraded the land and supported a food economy that does not distribute by social need and has left around two-thirds of Americans overweight or obese.

Wirzba promotes a sacrificial theology in which eating is recognized as being, in multiple dimensions, a matter of life and death. Contesting Stephen Webb's view of sacrifice as an outlet for pointless violence, he focuses on the personal and social preparation that should precede an act of killing. The acts of slaughter that take place in small-scale farming are, Wirzba suggests, sacrificial for both animal and stockperson, including a 'death of sorts in the one making the sacrifice' (p. 118) that is reflected in the hours of personal care also offered up. This is reflected in the story of Noah, who built an ark and cared for the animals that he sheltered within it, but on emerging onto dry land built an altar to God and sacrificed some of those animals, giving 'expression to the new sacrificial sensibility and devotion he had learned while being on the ark' (p. 121). Wirzba calls for dining tables to be turned into altars in the sense of becoming sites of sacrificial sharing. In view of all this, vegetarianism is an ambiguous commitment. It *may* reflect a refusal to accept that death is a part of life and to participate in relationships of sacrificial care. At the very least, vegetarians need to be clear whether their opposition is to industrial livestock production or something else.

Sacrificial eating will necessarily be eucharistic, with bread providing a basic metaphor for food production and consumption. Wirzba is alive to the wonder of this basic foodstuff, which requires the growing of grain, its transformation into flour, and social relations around its production and sharing. In observations that scarcely deserve relegation to a footnote, he observes how the ability to produce bread marks a key point in societal development, requiring a settled population able to grow crops and the transition beyond animism to an attitude to the material world as providing elements for human production (p. 14). The bread that is offered at the altar is produced by a confluence of technical, psychological and social processes. By extension we are all called, Wirzba avows, to be priests of the world, offering up with thanksgiving on the altar of the whole earth the results of our labour.

Wirzba's main theological sources are biblical and doctrinal. Although these offer firm foundations for a coherent overall position, it would have been interesting for these to have been related to actual historic Christian dietary disciplines. Although this approach would have brought some diffuseness—there being no single historic Christian position on diet—the seasonal and monastic patterns of eating that, for example, structured dietary discipline in medieval Europe provide helpful concrete instances of how some of Wirzba's proposals might be lived out in reality. Nevertheless, this is a fabulous study which, from personal experience, excites an upper level undergraduate class in religion. It is sufficiently theological to engage committed Christians but open enough to draw in questioners. However, its sound methodology and well-developed positions make it also very much a constructive work of theology. Readers of this journal with interests in food might hope for greater radicalism, such as the advocacy of vegetarianism or veganism. But such positions are unlikely to find wide acceptance, regardless of their merits. Moreover, the arguments underlying them are sometimes simplistic. From an ecological standpoint, the food that is least costly to eat will vary as a result of regional and even local factors: for instance, in upland areas unsuited to crops, meat production might be the most sustainable land use. Furthermore, from a welfare perspective, dairy cows or laying hens kept in poor conditions will suffer more than cattle or broiler hens who have enjoyed a good life and been killed humanely. Wirzba's vision is more challenging than a radical minority view because it could become reality. Being based on principles rather than prescriptions, there is no reason why his proposals for responsible, sustainable agriculture and food production should not find wide acceptance. Some readers and eaters might wish to return to a vegetarian Eden, or alternatively, to anticipate in present life a future heavenly reconciliation in which dying and death will be no more. Such desires are praiseworthy. However, it

is far from clear that protological or eschatological transformations can be effected by human effort alone. At the very least, they would require massive regulatory interventions in everyday life of a kind not witnessed even in the medieval era. For this side of the eschaton, Wirzba provides a rich offering that is both challenging and sane.